

Lessons of the Paris Commune

By MANUEL GOMEZ.

I.

ON the eighteenth of March of every year, regular as clock-work, the social-democratic parties of the Second International remembered the Paris Commune—much as they might remember a flood, or a festival, or the birthday of one of their leaders. Anniversary mass meetings were held thruout Europe, at which the speaker of the evening repeated the story, especially re-learned for the occasion, of the seizure of the cannon on the heights of Montmartre, the ringing of the church bells, the spontaneous outpouring of the National Guard, the violent death of Thomas and Lecomte, the election of the Commune, the delayed sortie against the Versailles, the activity of Thiers' spies, the stealthy entry of his troops into the undefended southwest end of Paris, the barricades, and the terrible butchery at the mur des federes—the “same old story,” as it came to be known. With few exceptions, the social-democratic leaders made no serious attempt to analyze the Commune in its relation to the development of the class struggle. They were, in fact, bewildered and embarrassed by the great proletarian tradition of 1871, which did not seem to have a place in their world of parliamentarism; they limited themselves to contrasting the ferocity of the Thiers reaction with the “generosity” and leniency of the Communards. The one lesson they drew was that the principle of “democracy” had been vindicated in the elections to the Commune, held March 26.

Only the anarchists kept alive in some measure the spirit of the Commune, tho of course, they followed Kropotkin in presenting it merely as a step toward the creation of an autonomous system of “free communes.” In the United States it is not too much to say that the Commune was ignored except for the purpose of tableau and theatrical entertainment. Sometimes the Socialist Party was too busy even to remember the date.

“Marx, however,” as Lenin pointed out in his work on The State and Revolution, “was not only enthusiastic about the heroism of the Communards—‘storming heaven’ as he said. In

the mass revolutionary movement, altho it did not attain its objective, he saw a historic experiment of gigantic importance, a certain advance of the world proletarian revolution, a practical step more important than hundreds of programs and discussions. To analyze this experiment, to draw its lessons in tactics, to re-examine his theory in the new light it afforded—such was the problem as it presented itself to Marx.”

Immediately upon the fall of the Commune Marx presented his Address of the General Council of the International Workmen's Association, now known as The Civil War in France, which is not only a passionate defense of the Commune, but an analysis of its historical significance, its accomplishments and the mistakes that were responsible for its final defeat. Lenin calls attention to the important fact that the only “correction” which Marx thought it necessary to make in the Communist Manifesto was made on the basis of the revolutionary experience of the Paris Communards.

“The last preface to a new German edition of the Communist Manifesto signed by both its authors,” Lenin reminds us, “is dated June 24, 1872. In this preface the authors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels say that the program of the Communist Manifesto is now “in some places out of date.”

“Especially,” they continue, “did the Commune demonstrate that the ‘working class cannot simply seize the available ready machinery of the state and set it going for its own ends.’”

The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first attempt of the workers to break up the bourgeois state and to transform existing society. Despite the element of vague republican sentimentalism, it was essentially proletarian. At the very beginning, on March 20, the Journal Officiel declared:

“The proletarians of the capital, in the midst of the failure and treason of the governing classes, have realized that the hour has arrived for them to save the situation by taking over the direction of public affairs. The proletariat, in the face of

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the permanent threat to its rights, of the absolute refusal of its legitimate aspirations, and of the ruin of the country and all its hopes, understood that it was its imperative duty and absolute right to take its destiny into its own hands and ensure victory by seizing power."

In form the Commune was a dictatorship, notwithstanding its superficial aspect of democracy. True, a general election was held, but this was after the rich bourgeoisie had either fled to Versailles, or gone into hiding and was, for all practical purposes, disfranchised. The Commune showed clearly as much in its failure as in its success, that a dictatorship is necessary to destroy the opposition of the bourgeoisie. How long this transitional period of dictatorship would have to last was not fully appreciated by Marx or Engels, or by Lenin. The experience of 1871 was too limited to indicate. It required the experience of the Russian Revolution to show that the dictatorship of the proletariat is, indeed, an entire epoch.

II.

THE lessons of the Commune of Paris fall naturally into two main categories, the general, the tactical. The most important general lessons have already been referred to. Others that must be mentioned are the following:

a. The Commune, like every great revolutionary upheaval, showed more clearly than before the essentially repressive feature of the state, as well as its class basis. It is precisely this that makes it necessary to break up the bourgeois state, to "shatter it" as Marx says, before a proletarian rule can be established.

b. The Commune revealed the inner rottenness of bourgeois nationalism. Prussians and Versaillese, who a few weeks before had been facing each other on the battlefield, co-operated freely in the struggle against the Parisian proletariat. The Commune in its turn was international in its outlook. Not only did it admit foreigners to citizenship, some of them (as for instance Leo Frankel) being active Communards, but it proclaimed the universal fraternity of all labor and spoke in the name of the "Universal Republic."

c. The Commune showed that, with the development of an independent working class, every bourgeois revolution places immediately upon the agenda the question of the proletarian revolution. This had already been faintly indicated in the struggles of 1848-50, especially during the February and July days when the independent demands of the working class were really the central point at issue. In 1871 the fall of Napoleon III found the rich bourgeoisie unable to stabilize its own revolution thru fear of the proletariat, which thereupon seized power. In a much more conclusive way this lesson is confirmed by the more recent revolutions in Russia, Germany, Austria and Hungary. Who can doubt that the Japanese revolution, when it comes, will reveal the same phenomenon?

d. "The Commune taught the workers to consider concretely the problems of revolution." This is Lenin's phrase, and his own work is sufficient commentary upon it.

In glancing even briefly at some of the tactical lessons of 1871, we get a closer view of the historic uprising of the Communards. Tactics are not something apart from the medium in which they are applied; they are limited by and conditioned upon it. One readily recognizes that the mistakes made by the Commune may be explained by the conditions in which it developed, by the elementary stage of the evolution of productive forces, by the political immaturity of the proletariat as a class, the great lack of separate proletarian traditions, etc. Nevertheless, it would be foolish for a revolutionary party today to refuse to learn from those mistakes. Not to look at the Commune critically, to praise indiscriminately the good and the bad after the manner of religious enthusiasts, would be to spurn the greater part of our precious heritage of revolutionary experience.

The accomplishments and failings of the Paris Commune teach us the following:

a. Any "people's" revolution (involving the movement of real masses) places before the proletariat the problem of revolutionary alliance. Only because of the united front between the Parisian workers and a considerable section of the bourgeoisie was the Commune possible. This does not mean that the social composition of the Commune of 1871 was a correct pattern. Far from it. The workers dominated the alliance of all revolutionary elements but they were incapable, under the conditions prevailing, of securing unquestioned and complete control. Some of the reasons are given below. However, the Commune did show the importance of allies for the proletariat.

b. A not inconsiderable section of the lower middle class will follow the revolutionary lead of the workers. This was definitely proved by the experience of the Commune. It is scarcely necessary to add that such support will be much smaller under present conditions than in the Paris of 1871.

c. The Commune made the mistake of underestimating the importance of a union with the peasantry, altho as Lenin reminds us it was making its way toward such a union. This mistake was fatal in a country with a predominantly peasant population. Ephemeral revolutionary "communes" sprang up in some of the other cities of France but nevertheless Paris remained virtually isolated. The experience of the Hungarian workers' republic, in our own time, also shows us the importance of winning over the peasantry. The Bolshevik Party of Russia, under the leadership of Lenin, avoided the mistake made by the Hungarian comrades. Soviet Russia is a workers' and peasants' republic and the alliance with the peasantry is one of the foundation stones for the success of the first lasting proletarian dictatorship.

d. It is necessary not only to shatter the bourgeois state apparatus but to replace it with the workers' state—the pro-

letarian dictatorship. The Communards did break up the old machinery of bourgeois rule more or less effectively: They abolished the standing army and replaced it by the nation in arms, and they struck powerful blows against the bureaucracy by abolishing parliamentarism (in the sense of the old "talking shops") and by the decree lowering the pay of all state servants to the level of workmen's wages. But they failed to organize in a firm and centralized way the state powers of the workers. The state apparatus was loosely knit, under no uniform control and frequently in chaos. The basis of this defect, which cost the Commune dear, was that altho the Commune was in fact a dictatorship it was not a conscious dictatorship. Comrade Trotsky points out in his book on Dictatorship vs Democracy that the central committee of the National Guard, which was the sole governor of Paris in the early days, neglected to order an immediate march on Versailles because of the impossibility of holding elections with the flower of the proletariat out of the city.

"The central committee," says Trotsky, "appointed March 22 as the day of elections for the Commune; but, not sure of itself, frightened at its own illegality, striving to act in unison with more 'legal' institutions, entered into ridiculous and endless negotiations with a quite helpless assembly of mayors and deputies of Paris, showing its readiness to divide power with them if only an agreement could be arrived at. Meanwhile precious time was slipping by."

e. The Commune did not show sufficient energy and firmness in dealing with its internal as well as external foes. This mistake, in the failure to organize a satisfactory apparatus, was due to the fact that it was not a conscious dictatorship. The bourgeoisie, meantime was steadily at work preparing the downfall of the Commune. Events themselves finally forced the Commune to take its stand in principle on the path of intimidation. "The creation of the Committee of Public Safety," says Trotsky, "was dictated, in the case of many of its supporters, by the Red Terror." The committee was appointed "to cut off the heads of traitors" and "to avenge treachery." To stop the murder of prisoners by the Versailles, a decree was passed that for every prisoner murdered three hostages would be shot from among the anti-Communards remaining in Paris. The decree was not carried out. No prisoner or unarmed man was killed by the Communards thruout the siege from April 2 to May 23.

f. Most of all the Commune showed the need of a consistent revolutionary theory embodied in a strong, centralized, disciplined leading organization—the party of the proletariat. Insufficiency of leadership and program was the outstanding weakness of the Commune. The virtues and defects of Blanquism were plainly revealed. On the one hand it was shown what an important role can be played by a disciplined "militant minority" and on the other hand it was proved that this militant minority must have its roots deep in the masses of the working class, that it must be a party equipped with revolutionary science, that it must know the road along which it is to travel.

III.

AT the beginning of the present article I stated that the gentlemanly leaders of the Second International had devoted very little attention to the Paris Commune of 1871. In English, if we except Marx's Civil War in France, Engels' commentaries and the writings of Lenin and Trotsky, the only works worthy of consideration are Lissagaray's History of the Commune of 1871, Belfort Bax's History of the Paris Commune and the interesting but often misleading researches of Postgate. It is entirely characteristic of Kautsky, who, as Lenin pointed out, had neglected the Paris Commune, did begin to write about it in 1919, not to draw revolutionary lessons from it, but to attack Soviet Russia. In contrasting the Soviet regime with the Commune, Kautsky passes hurriedly over the virtues of the Communards in order to praise them for their shortcomings, which alas, he does not find exemplified in the wickedly successful Bolsheviks.

No! Our Russian comrades learned well the lessons of 1871. They fortified themselves in the revolutionary traditions of the Commune, but they did not repeat its mistakes as Kautsky hints they should have done. And while the Paris of the Commune was overthrown after scarcely two months of life, the Soviet power is already in its ninth year and is more firmly established than ever, which is the whole source of Kautsky's abiding woe.

Despite the defeats that are inevitable along the road, turning the experiences of its defeats into lessons for future victories, the proletariat of all countries advances towards its emancipation. "The Soviet power," said Lenin, "is the second step of the world revolution, the development of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Paris Commune is the first step."

To France of the Commune

RALPH CHAPLIN.

MOTHER of revolutions, stern and sweet,

Thou of the Red Commune's heroic days;
Unsheathe thy sword, let thy pent lightning blaze,
Until these new bastiles fall at thy feet.
Once more thy sons march down the ancient street,
Led by pale men from silent Pere Lachaise;
Once more La Carmagnole—La Marseillaise
Blend with the war drum's quick and angry beat.

Ah, France—our France—must they again endure
The crown of thorns upon the cross of gold?
Is morning here. . . ? Then speak that we may know!
The sky seems lighter but we are not sure.
Is morning here. . . ? The whole world holds its breath
To hear the crimson Gallic rooster crow!